

## BALANCE PADS OR MATS

In general, the firmer and flatter the surface, the easier it is to balance on. Add softness or an incline and there is a balance challenge. For your participants, standing on balance pads is probably similar to us trying to stand on a water bed. The compliant surface gives way under their feet, taking away many of their proprioceptive tools and requiring constant balance adjustments. Balance pads or mats force them to use much more visual and vestibular input to stay balanced. An example of a visual tool you might use to help them reestablish balance is a stationary visual target at horizon level. Engaging and integrating the sensory systems is good balance training.

### ***Benefits »***

- Facilitates and integrates vestibular and visual inputs for balance.
- Provides challenging activities for balance integration.
- Uses variety of pads to suit individual ability.

### ***Set It Up »***

Provide adequate balance supports as discussed under the safety section of this activity. Corners of a room, with a walker in front, or near a handrail are good places for balance pads. If possible, provide balance pads in a variety of densities, shapes, and sizes.

### ***How to Do It »***

- Participants step up onto the pad, using the provided balance supports.
- They take time to get situated and steady.
- Get their permission to continue. (It may take a while for them to be ready.)
- Cue them for proper posture:
  - Abs are braced and shoulder blades back and down.
  - Ribs are lifted to lengthen the spine, the head is retracted, and the chin is level.
  - Shoulders are over the hips, hips are over the ankles.
  - Knees are soft.
- Cue participants to find a stationary visual target at horizon level and try to keep their balance.



When participants are ready, try the following movements. Within each category, movements progress from easy to more difficult. Get one move down comfortably before progressing to the next

### ***Arm Movements***

- Participants should have soft knees. Their eyes face ahead.
- They stand quietly, hands on their chest.
- Use the following cues:
  - Lift one arm out to the side; when ready, lift it overhead.
  - Put it back down.

- Do the other arm. Lift it to the side, up, and back down. Take your time.
- Put both arms out to the sides, then tilt them right and then left (like an airplane about to make a turn). Then lift both arms overhead, like sliding down a chute.
- Lift the arms in opposite directions: one forward, one back, then one up, one down.
- Add more trunk movement: Both arms make moves like an airplane. Big turns right, then left, dip, swirl, and rise.
- Do a few small arm swings, and then bigger arm swings.

### ***Sways With Arms on Hips***

- ⊙ These sways are kind of like standing weight shifts. Participants will probably begin by trying to shift weight using their hips. That's not what you want. Cue them instead, to sway from their ankles, not their hips. You'll probably need to help them keep their body straight from ankle to shoulder by lightly touching their hip and shoulder to keep it aligned. It takes some learning for them to be able to sway from the ankles.
- ⊙ Use the following cues:
  - Shift weight toward the toes.
  - Shift weight left, then right.
  - Shift weight toward the heels (this is tough; watch them closely).
  - Shift weight in a circular pattern.
  - Can they do a figure-eight pattern?

### ***Leg Movements***

- ⊙ Do one or two sways, side to side, to get used to shifting your weight from one leg to the other.
- ⊙ Sway left, lift the right heel. Sway right, lift the right heel. Get comfortable with that.
- ⊙ Take little steps in place. Start with two steps, then progress to four without losing your balance.
- ⊙ Do little knee bends.
- ⊙ March in place (Intermediate).
- ⊙ Lift knee with abs pulled in (Advanced).
- ⊙ Lift one foot off the pad and move it about a bit (Very difficult).
- ⊙ Do the Hokey Pokey—add a shake to the previous foot movement (this is the most difficult).

### ***Slow Head Turns***

If participants become dizzy from this activity, help them step off the mat or pad. This may be an inappropriate activity for them.

- ⊙ Look left, then right.
- ⊙ Look down, then up.
- ⊙ Do the same wearing sunglasses or in dim lighting (Difficult).

### ***Same Moves on Land***

After performing a few of the previous activities, help participants carefully step off the balance pad and then do the same motions on the ground. They should immediately notice and appreciate the firm, solid ground and feel much more stable now. It's amazing how easy the firm ground feels after a balance pad. I say it's like getting your sea legs back!

### ***Give It More Balance »***

- Provide distractions.
  - Read while standing on the pad.
  - Juggle a ball or tap a balloon in the air (difficult).
- Change to a softer balance pad.
- Use a different pad under each foot.
- Wear sunglasses.
- Close one eye.
- Use a balance mat (this is a giant balance pad, about four feet by six feet).
  - Walk across it.
  - Walk with big steps.
  - Walk with arm swings.
- Use a foam balance beam.
- Use hedgehogs (bumpy half-domes, available from fitness catalogs and Web sites) placed beside a handrail or with a walker, at least to start.
  - Walk across six to eight of them, stepping-stone style.
  - Stand on two that are parallel or offset and try to get your balance for a moment or so.

### ***Keep It Safe »***

Balance pads, mats, and hedgehogs are for individuals or small groups where they can be used as a take-turns activity. Also, people with diabetes or peripheral neuropathies should not use balance pads. (Inadequate feedback from their feet already limits their perception of the ground, much as a balance pad does.)

If you do choose to use them, start with the firmest, largest pads. Look for pads with nonskid backing. For frail populations, large, very firm pads are the safest choice. The pad should be big enough for them to stand on with both feet. Always provide plenty of balance supports, including support on all three sides and you or a walker in front. For participants with walkers, place the pads inside the walker with a sturdy chair, a wall, or a corner behind the person. For participants without walkers, use corners, too, with a sturdy chair in front, or place the pad next to a handrail, and with yourself nearby.

Finally, prepare them for the activity. Before you begin, discuss what they'll be doing and let them feel the pads so they will know what to expect. Let them make their own choices.

### ***Live It »***

Activities on balance pads may make participants feel as if they're walking on eggshells, but the practice can engage and improve the vestibular and visual systems. Walking on eggshells is good balance practice.